

#YALICHAT with the U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues, Cathy Russell

Cathy Russell serves as the U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues. Previously she served at the White House, coordinating the development of the Obama Administration's strategy to prevent and respond to gender-based violence globally. Join Ambassador Russell (@AmbCathyRussell) for a Twitter #YALICHAT on Wednesday, March 18th at 13:00 UTC. Additional details below.



ssell visits girls at a school in Zambia

As young African leaders and followers of the YALI Network, you already know that the United States invests in women and girls because it's the right thing to do for gender equality and the smart thing to do for our foreign policy.

When policies and programs consider women and girls, they're more successful. They promote stronger democracies and more durable peace agreements. They increase food security and make for healthier families. They improve public service delivery. And they lead to fewer conflicts and more rapidly growing economies.

As the U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues, it's my job to work with my colleagues across the U.S. government and with leaders around the world to advance the status of women and girls worldwide. Every day I talk with government officials, world leaders, and women and girls around the world about how women have contributed to global progress and why we need to break the barriers keeping women and girls from fully participating in society.

Earlier this month, I had the privilege of presenting ten women from ten countries with the Secretary of State's [International Women of Courage Award](#). These women, including Marie Claire Tchecola from Guinea and Beatrice Epaye from the Central African Republic, have shown exceptional courage and leadership in advocating for women's rights and empowerment.

As an emergency room nurse in Guinea, Marie Claire Tchecola has been on the front lines of the fight against Ebola. When she became infected with the Ebola virus, she took precautions to protect other workers and her family from contracting the disease – and when she recovered, she went back to work. Through her leadership in the Ebola Survivors Association of Guinea, Marie Claire continues to spread awareness about the disease and fight the stigma associated with its survivors.

When Seleka rebels stormed the streets of Bangui and overtook the Central African Republic's capital, one of their first stops was the office of Beatrice Epaye, an outspoken activist who raised her voice to condemn the horrors of civil war and to call for peace, human rights, and good governance. Refusing to be intimidated, Beatrice took to the radio and met with local and international organizations, eventually becoming the president of the Preparatory Committee for the National Dialogue.

Ms. Tchecola and Ms. Epaye are proof of how women can and do transform societies with little fanfare through their everyday actions. Yet in every country – from Guinea to Germany to Guatemala – women and girls face challenges and barriers that keep them from fully participating. A family may choose to send a son, but not a daughter, to school because there's only enough money for one child's fees. A woman may be kept from launching a new business because she can't access capital. Or bias and stereotypes about women's roles in society will keep a woman from her rightful seat at the peacekeeping table or in Parliament.

It will take all of us – men and women, boys and girls – to achieve the progress we need to unleash the power of women and girls. But if every one of us takes action, we can break down these barriers and open doors for women and girls of courage.

I urge you all, both my fellow women and our male allies, to [take the #Africa4Her pledge](#) and tell us how you will invest in women and girls. Show us how you will raise, educate, protect, support, mentor, and elevate the many women and girls of courage in your life.

Join the YALICHAT on Wednesday, March 18th at:

12:00-13:00 Cape Verde Time (CVT)

13:00-14:00 UTC/GMT

14:00-15:00 West Africa Time (WAT)

15:00-16:00 Central Africa (CAT) and South Africa Standard Time (SAST)

18:00-19:00 Eastern Africa Time (EAT)

19:00-20:00 Seychelles and Mauritius (SCT/MUT)

Eco-Pads Keep Girls in School



Taking advantage of a morning break between classes in Buteba, Uganda, then-13-year-old Lucy Athieno set off to play with friends. Then she heard some boys shouting at her.

She looked down and saw a blotch of red on her otherwise clean uniform. Embarrassed, she quickly sat down. It was the only way to stop the boys from making fun of her. After all the other students had gone, she got up and went home. She did not return to school.


Many girls in low-income communities drop out of school when menstruation begins because they lack information and hygienic material to use.

Days went by before Athieno shared her experience with her late mother's friend. The woman told her to continue using rags and to throw them away after use. She said, "Nobody should see your blood. It is taboo."

A year later, Athieno was adopted by an aunt who bought Athieno her first sanitary pads. The gift of pads made the young woman realize that the "problem" of menstruation was not unique to her. The aunt also persuaded Athieno to return to school.

When she got to secondary school, Athieno — a 2014 Mandela Washington Fellow and YALI Network member — suggested to a teacher that they cut pieces of cloth and give them to other girls. She believed all girls should have the right to good health and education and not be hindered by what is a normal biological process. But the teacher considered the idea peculiar.

Convinced that her idea was realistic and desperately needed, Athieno carried it through to university. In her second year at Makerere University in 2010, she began to volunteer with a women's organization and was convinced her cause was justifiable. "Many girls were using rags or leaves or sitting in the sand during menstruation," she says.

Lucy Athieno makes reusable sanitary 

Eco-Pads to support retention of girls
in school.

As part of her volunteer work, she went to Kenya where she found an organization that was distributing sanitary pads to girls. Returning to Uganda, she purchased bed sheet material and cut it into pieces and thought, "What if I inserted something between two layers of this material – something that would absorb the blood?"

She experimented with different types of cloth pads until she settled on one that was washable, comfortable and reliable. "These pads are reusable for at least one year, making them not only affordable but environmentally friendly," she says, adding that the pads help young women return to and stay in school. One year's supply of pads cost just \$3, she notes.


Now 30, Athieno has bought four sewing machines to make pads that have helped hundreds of Ugandan girls. In 2013, she founded Aluta Holdings, which holds rights for the reusable "Eco-Pads." She wants to expand access to the product to other countries.

So far, Aluta has provided pads to more than 400 girls. Meanwhile, Athieno has mentored 200 girls, encouraging them to stay in school.

"I want to impact the whole of Africa," she says.

Closing Technology Gaps in Burkina Faso

Francine Legma didn't take her secondary school math teacher's advice. Instead she followed her instincts.

Francine Legma wants to close 
technology gaps in her home
country of Burkina Faso.


Legma earned poor grades in math and physics, so her teacher advised her to study literature "because it would be easier for me than scientific studies," she says. But the 2014 Mandela Washington Fellow and YALI Network member from Ouagadougou knew that studying science would lead to a better future.

With the support of her father, a university chemistry professor, Legma pursued the more challenging field and eventually earned a baccalaureate in science and mathematics. With a scholarship from the government of Burkina Faso, she went on to earn a bachelor's degree in computer science from the Institut d'Ingénierie Informatique in Limoges, France, and a master's degree in international commerce from Icofes in Paris.

"Like my mother, my father never put in our minds that a woman is less intelligent than a man," Legma notes, adding that both her parents stressed hard work, integrity and motivation in pursuit of any goal. "My parents have been the fuel of my inspiration," she says.

Now 35, Legma serves as an information technology project manager at Burkina Faso's national telecommunications company, Onatel. Through the company, she launched mobile payment, postpaid and customer loyalty systems.

She frequently participates in online discussions about technology "gaps." One is between developed and developing countries in telecommunications infrastructure, telecommunications law and Internet access. Another is between women's and men's use of new technologies.

Legma, center, teaches a group of young 
women about computer applications.

As a response to the latter concern, Legma started the nonprofit group [Femmes et Tic](#), which aims to educate young girls and women on the opportunities of the Internet and new technologies, and to raise awareness about the dangers and risks of their misuse.

Next on Legma's agenda are plans for a summer "tech camp." The camp will teach girls how to use the Internet, give oral presentations and hone their leadership skills. She has enlisted local schools and universities to help her develop the curriculum and is looking for other partners to help her acquire computers and other equipment.

Legma says she would like to add more technology classes for women and girls but is restricted by the limited number of skilled volunteer instructors. She hopes that other YALI Network members might be interested in becoming volunteer trainers. Potential trainers can find out more on the [Femmes et Tic](#) website.

"For me, trained girls and women is a must if I really want to contribute to change in a better way in my country," she says.


Nigerian Seeks Justice Against Domestic Abuse

"The change we so desire in the world today starts with each one of us. Don't give up."

— Naomi Osemedua

Naomi Osemedua says it should be easier for women to speak out about gender violence.

"Victims are afraid to come out and talk, as they are afraid of stigmatization," she explains. "They are afraid that when they come out people will say they are useless or that whatever happened to them was their fault."

Naomi Osemedua, center, stands up for  justice with fellow anti-abuse advocates in Abuja, Nigeria.

As in many cultures, women in Nigeria are often blamed for their own abuse, with critics suggesting their clothes or appearance provoked the assault or violence. Osemedua, a YALI Network member, founded the Nigerian branch of Making a Difference (M.A.D.) Positive International in Abuja in 2011 to break the silence surrounding sexual abuse and domestic violence. The organization's work extends beyond the capital city to Lagos and Abeokuta and to the rural areas of Kwara, Delta and Rivers states.

Osemedua, 36 and an abuse victim herself, has positive messages for women and youth — that they can become agents for social change.

"We must not talk alone but create action," she says.

The advocate constantly responds to requests for information about abuse and provides inspiration to help stop it. She regularly appears as a guest on local radio programs using passion and humor when talking about abuse, girls' education and other women's issues. She reaches out to women and girls, men and boys through social media as well as public and private partner organizations like WellBeing Foundation Africa, Project Pink Blue and GenVoices.


Although Osemedua estimates that so far those efforts have reached more than 10,000 women, it's not enough.

"It has been overwhelming because when you think you have started, you discover that you have not even scratched the surface," she explains.

Through M.A.D., in 2014 Osemedua helped organize Nigeria's "1 Billion Rising for Justice" event to demand justice for women who have been sexually assaulted. Organizers of the event, which happened on February 14 in cities around the world, proclaimed, "I refuse to stand by as more than 1 billion women experience violence. ... I am rising for justice."

In Abuja people danced to the words of the "1 Billion Rising for Justice" anthem, which includes these words: "I can see a world where we all live, safe and free from all oppression. No more rape or incest or abuse. Women are not a possession."

Osemedua is confident that change is on the horizon and that gender-based violence will end. "It may take time, but it will be worth the wait as people are searching for sincere and genuine change-makers," she says.

Naomi Osemedua, right, is interviewed  by a member of the local media in Abuja, Nigeria.

Osemedua contributes to her community in other ways. The YALI Network member is active in the government's YouWin! Program, serving as a volunteer mentor for entrepreneurs ages 18 to 45. She also works with with a leadership academy for girls ages 10 to 14 that focuses on leadership development. She says her work with the academy has been fulfilling.

"The work is important because these young girls will be the leaders of tomorrow, and there is no telling how far the impact will go. We believe that one girl can change the world."

"Other YALI network members can help girls in their communities by mentoring them. Even if it is just one girl at a time. ... with one girl, over time much can be achieved," she adds. "We hope that through our work with these girls that each one of them will indeed have a sense of true leadership and settle for nothing less than the best that they can be."

One of five siblings, the new mother credits her father with being her "greatest supporter and inspiration. She says her father "continually lavished love and affection on all of us ... [and] made sure we had the best education."

Osemedua says she has been "greatly inspired" by the YALI Network. "Just reading about all the great stuff others are doing makes me want to do more for my community and the world."

A [video](#) of Nigeria's 2014 1 Billion Rising for Justice dance event is available on YouTube. The song's lyrics are available on the 1 Billion Rising for Justice [website](#).


First Lady, Peace Corps Join to 'Let Girls Learn'

"When girls have a chance to learn, they raise healthier families, earn higher salaries, they contribute more to their nation's economy."

— First lady Michelle Obama

"Every girl matters, and when she is given the opportunity to get an education, everyone in her life benefits."


— Peace Corps Director Carrie Hessler-Radelet

Ugandan students read at school. USAID aims to improve equitable access to  education.

U.S. first lady Michelle Obama and the Peace Corps have joined to help girls around the world "get the education they deserve."

Globally, 62 million girls are not in school. Millions more are fighting to stay there. They often face harassment, discrimination, threats and violence just to get an education. And even when girls reach school, they may not have adequate materials to help them learn to read, write and do basic math.

"That just doesn't limit their prospects, leaving them more vulnerable to poverty, violence and disease, it limits the prospects of their families and their countries," Obama said in announcing the White House-Peace Corps "Let Girls Learn" collaboration March 3.

According to the White House, girls' attendance in secondary school is linked to later marriage,  later childbearing, lower maternal and infant mortality rates, lower birthrates and lower rates of HIV/AIDS. The World Bank reports that every year of secondary school education increases a girl's future earning power by 18 percent.


"When girls have a chance to learn, they raise healthier families, earn higher salaries, they contribute more to their nation's economy," the first lady said.

Let Girls Learn will empower local leaders to put lasting solutions in place. Peace Corps volunteers who live and work at the grass-roots level will serve as catalysts of community-led change.

In the collaboration's first year, Let Girls Learn will target 11 countries, six of them in Africa: Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mozambique, Togo and Uganda.

In Togo, 69 percent of adolescent girls do not complete primary school because of lack of funds for tuition, school supplies and uniforms. In Burkina Faso, 28 percent of girls give birth before the age of 18, interrupting school attendance. In Ghana, more than half of adolescent girls believe that domestic violence is justifiable, a belief that can be countered with education. In Mozambique, just 37 percent of adolescent girls have comprehensive knowledge of HIV prevention, putting them at risk.

From helping to start a school library to organizing a technology camp for girls, this collaboration will bring increased focus and resources to the issue of girls' education.

The new collaboration extends the existing Let Girls Learn initiative launched by the U.S.  Agency for International Development in 2014. USAID focuses on ensuring that girls and boys can safely enroll and learn in schools and that all children leave school with the skills they will need to thrive. USAID works to improve teaching techniques and learning materials; support regular assessments of reading skills; maximize classroom instruction time spent on basic skills, especially reading; support instruction in native languages; and promote parent and community involvement in education.

As USAID Chief Strategy Officer Carla Koppell says, "Because an educated girl is a force for change, she is the leader and peacemaker of tomorrow."

A [video](#) of Michelle Obama speaking about Let Girls Learn is available on YouTube.

[10 Reasons to Invest in Women and Girls](#)

A girl at the Kakenya Center for Excellence in Kenya smiles after receiving her school uniform. 

They're your mothers and your daughters, your sisters and your aunts, your cousins and your friends. There are so many reasons to invest in them, besides the fact that you love them. Here are 10:

1. **More inclusive government.** If you'd like to see less fighting among your elected officials, encourage women to run for public office. According to USAID, countries where women hold at least 30 percent of political seats are more inclusive, egalitarian and democratic.
2. **Improved public service delivery.** The next time you're frustrated by poor roads or a lack of potable water, vote for a woman. USAID reports that women's political participation increases cooperation across party and ethnic lines and government responsiveness to citizens.
3. **Greater farm production.** The UN's Food and Agricultural Organization found that by

empowering women farmers with the same access to land, new technologies and capital as men, crop yields could be increased by as much as 30 percent.


4. **Fewer hungry people.** When women succeed, society succeeds. Nowhere is that more clear than in food production. In that same report, the Food and Agricultural Organization estimates that a 30 percent boost in production can reduce the number of hungry people by 150 million.
5. **Increased buying power.** As the World Bank's chief economist, Lawrence Summers said, "Investment in girls' education may well be the highest return investment available in the developing world." Each year of secondary school boosts a girl's future earning power by roughly 20 percent.
6. **Stronger economies.** Educating a girl pays dividends for her family and her country, too. According to USAID, when 10 percent more girls go to school, a country's GDP increases on average by 3 percent.
7. **Fewer child deaths.** Women who are educated are better able to take care of themselves and their children. According to UNESCO, a child born to a mother who can read is 50 percent more likely to live past age five.
8. **Less HIV/AIDS.** For UNICEF, education is essential to slowing the spread of HIV/AIDS. That's because girls who are better educated are less likely to engage in casual sex.
9. **Fewer conflicts.** When women's lives are valued, their experiences considered and their voices heard, better outcomes prevail. Through its peacekeeping operations, the UN has found that when women are included, deadly conflicts can be avoided.
10. **More lasting peace.** Women have an important role to play in driving reconciliation and reconstruction. According to the UN, including women in conflict negotiation and peacebuilding efforts can lead to more widely accepted and durable peace agreements.

Replay: First Lady's Remarks on Women and Girls

Most times, a speech suits the time, place and audience for which it was intended. But sometimes, a speech transcends that time, space and audience. First lady Michelle Obama's speech at the 2014 summit of the Mandela Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders is one of those speeches. With honesty and vigor, she addressed the need to change attitudes and beliefs about women and girls. Here are some of her remarks.

[...]

Today, I want us to talk — and I mean really talk. I want to speak as openly and honestly as possible about the issues we care about and what it means to be a leader, not just in Africa but in the world today.

First lady Michelle Obama speaks to 

participants of the Presidential Summit
for the Washington Fellowship for Young
African Leaders in Washington on July 30,
2014.

Now, one of the issues that I care deeply about is [...] girls' education. And across the globe, the statistics on this issue are heartbreaking. Right now, 62 million girls worldwide are not in school, including nearly 30 million girls in sub-Saharan Africa. And as we saw in Pakistan, where Malala Yousafzai was shot in the head by Taliban gunmen, and in Nigeria where more than 200 girls were kidnapped from their school dormitory by Boko Haram terrorists, even when girls do attend school, they often do so at great risk.

And as my husband said earlier this week, we know that when girls aren't educated, that doesn't just limit their prospects, leaving them more vulnerable to poverty, violence and disease, it limits the prospects of their families and their countries as well.

Now, in recent years, there's been a lot of talk about how to address this issue, and how we need more schools and teachers, more money for toilets and uniforms, transportation, school fees. And of course, all of these issues are critically important, and I could give a perfectly fine speech today about increasing investments in girls' education around the world.

But I said I wanted to be honest. And if I do that, we all know that the problem here isn't only about resources, it's also about attitudes and beliefs. It's about whether fathers and mothers think their daughters are as worthy of an education as their sons. It's about whether societies cling to outdated laws and traditions that oppress and exclude women, or whether they view women as full citizens entitled to fundamental rights.

So the truth is, I don't think it's really productive to talk about issues like girls' education unless we're willing to have a much bigger, bolder conversation about how women are viewed and treated in the world today. And we need to be having this conversation on every continent and in every country on this planet. And that's what I want to do today with all of you, because so many of you are already leading the charge for progress in Africa.

Now, as an African-American woman, this conversation is deeply personal to me. The roots of my family tree are in Africa. As you know, my husband's father was born and raised in Kenya — and members of our extended family still live there. I have had the pleasure of traveling to Africa a number of times over the years, including four trips as first lady, and I have brought my mother and my daughters along with me whenever I can. So believe me, the blood of Africa runs through my veins, and I care deeply about Africa's future.

Now, the status of women in Africa is also personal to me as a woman. See, what I want you all to understand is that I am who I am today because of the people in my family — particularly the men in my family — who valued me and invested in me from the day I was born. I had a father, a brother, uncles, grandfathers who encouraged me and challenged me, protected me, and told me that I was smart and strong and beautiful.

And as I grew up, the men who raised me set a high bar for the type of men I'd allow into my life — which is why I went on to marry a man who had the good sense to fall in love with a woman who was

his equal — and to treat me as such. A man who supports and reveres me, and who supports and reveres our daughters as well.


And throughout my life — understand this — every opportunity I've had, every achievement I'm proud of has stemmed from this solid foundation of love and respect. So given these experiences, it saddens and confuses me to see that too often, women in some parts of Africa are still denied the rights and opportunities they deserve to realize their potential.

Now, let's be very clear: In many countries in Africa, women have made tremendous strides. More girls are attending school. More women are starting businesses. Maternal mortality has plummeted. And more women are serving in parliaments than ever before. In fact, in some countries, more than 30 percent of legislators are women. In Rwanda, it's over 50 percent — which, by the way, is more than double the percentage of women in the U.S. Congress.

Now, these achievements represent remarkable progress. But at the same time, when girls in some places are still being married off as children, sometimes before they even reach puberty; when female genital mutilation still continues in some countries; when human trafficking, rape and domestic abuse are still too common, and perpetrators are often facing no consequences for their crimes — then we still have some serious work to do in Africa and across the globe.

And while I have great respect for cultural differences, I think we can all agree that practices like genital cutting, forced child marriage, domestic violence are not legitimate cultural practices, they are serious human rights violations and have no place in any country on this Earth. These practices have no place in our shared future, because we all know that our future lies in our people — in their talent, their ambition, their drive. And no country can ever truly flourish if it stifles the potential of its women and deprives itself of the contributions of half of its citizens.

And I know this firsthand from the history of my own country. A century ago, women in America weren't allowed to vote. Decades ago, it was perfectly legal for employers to refuse to hire women. Domestic violence was viewed not as a crime, but as a private family matter between a man and his wife.

First lady Michelle Obama hugs a  participant of the Presidential Summit for the Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders in Washington on July 30, 2014.

But in each generation, people of conscience stood up and rejected these unjust practices. They chained themselves to the White House gates, waged hunger strikes in prison to win the right to vote. They took their bosses to court. They spoke out about rape and fought to prosecute rapists, despite the stigma and shame. They left their abusive husbands, even when that meant winding up on the streets with their children.

And today in America, we see the results of those hard-fought battles: 60 percent of college students today are women. Women are now more than half the workforce. And in recent decades, women's employment has added nearly \$2 trillion to the U.S. economy — yes, trillion.

Now, are we anywhere near full economic, political, and domestic equality in the United States? Absolutely not. We still struggle every day with serious issues like violence against women, unequal pay. Women are still woefully underrepresented in our government and in the senior ranks of our corporations.

But slowly, generation after generation, we've been moving in the right direction because of brave individuals who were willing to risk their jobs, their reputations, and even their lives to achieve equality. And it wasn't just brave women who made these sacrifices. It was also brave men, too — men who hired women, men who passed laws to empower women, men who prosecuted other men who abused women.

So to all the men, my brothers here today, I have a simple message: We need you to shake things up. Too often, women are fighting these battles alone, but men like you, progressive men who are already ahead of the curve on women's issues, you all are critically important to solving this problem.

And that starts by doing a little introspection. And I say this not just to the 250 of you who are in the room today, but to men around the world. Men in every country need to look into their hearts and souls and ask themselves whether they truly view and treat women as their equals. And then when you all encounter men in your lives who answer no to that question, then you need to take them to task. You need to tell them that any man who uses his strength to oppress women is a coward, and he is holding back the progress of his family and his country.

Tell them that a truly strong, powerful man isn't threatened by a strong, powerful woman. Instead, he is challenged by her, he is inspired by her, he is pleased to relate to her as an equal. And I want you to keep modeling that behavior yourselves by promoting women in your companies, passing laws to empower women in your countries, and holding the same ambitious dreams for your daughters as you do for your sons.

And to the women here, my sisters [...] I want us as women to understand that oppression is not a one-way street.

See, too often, without even realizing it, we as women internalize the oppression we face in our societies by believing harmful messages about how we should look and act, particularly as women of color — messages that tell us that we're ugly or irrelevant, that we don't deserve full control over our bodies, that we should keep our mouths shut and just do as we're told. And then, too often, we turn around and impose those same beliefs on other women and girls in our lives, including our own daughters.

For example, in countries across the globe, there are women who still support and carry out the practice of genital cutting. There are women who are still insisting on marrying off their young daughters or keeping them home from school to help with the housework.

And then there are the more subtle harms that we afflict — inflict on each other — the harm of spurning our sisters who don't conform to traditions because we're jealous or suspicious of their courage and their freedom; the harm of turning a blind eye when a woman in our community is being abused because we don't want to cause conflict with our neighbors by speaking up.

And I imagine that for some of you here today, getting your degree might have meant disobeying or disappointing your families. Maybe while you've been acing your studies and thriving in your career, you have a grandmother who has been wringing her hands because you're not yet married.

But, my sisters, you all are here today because you have found a way to overcome these challenges, and you have blossomed into powerful, accomplished women. And we need you all to help others do the same.


All of us, men and women on every continent, we all need to identify these problems in ourselves and in our communities, and then commit to solving them. And I say this to you not just as lawyers and activists and business leaders, but as current and future parents. Because as a mother myself, I can tell you that this is where change truly happens. With the behavior we model, with our actions and inactions, every day, we as parents shape the values of the next generation.

For example, my parents never had the chance to attend university, but they had the courage and foresight to push me to get the best education I could. And they weren't threatened by the prospect of me having more opportunities than they had — just the opposite. They were thrilled.

And that's what should drive us all: the hope of raising the next generation to be stronger, smarter and bolder than our generation. And that is exactly the kind of work that so many of you are already doing in your families and your communities, which is why I'm so proud of you.

[...]

This is where Africa's future lies — with those women-run businesses, with those girls attending university, and with leaders like you who are making those dreams possible. And the question today is how all of you and young people like you will steer Africa's course to embrace that future.

First lady Michelle Obama speaks to  selected participants of the Presidential Summit for the Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders in Washington on July 30, 2014, during a roundtable discussion.

Because ultimately, that's what leadership is really about. It's not just about holding degrees or holding elected office. And it's not about preserving our own power or continuing traditions that oppress and exclude.

Leadership is about creating new traditions that honor the dignity and humanity of every individual. Leadership is about empowering all of our people — men, women, boys and girls — to fulfill every last bit of their God-given potential. And when we commit to that kind of leadership across the globe, that is when we truly start making progress on girls' education. Because that's when families in small villages around the world will demand equal opportunities for their daughters. They won't wait. That's when countries will willingly and generously invest in sending their girls to school, because they'll know how important it is.

And we all know the ripple effects we can have when we give our girls a chance to learn. We all know that girls who are educated earn higher wages. They're more likely to stand up to

discrimination and abuse. They have healthier children who are more likely to attend school themselves.

So no matter where you all work, no matter what issue you focus on — whether it's health or microfinance, human rights or clean energy — women's equality must be a central part of your work. It must. Because make no mistake about it, the work of transforming attitudes about women, it now falls on your shoulders. And it's up to you all to embrace the future. [...]

And I know this won't be easy. I know that you will face all kinds of obstacles and resistance — you already have. But when you get tired or frustrated, when things seem hopeless and you start thinking about giving up, I want you to remember the words of the man whom your fellowship is now named — and I know these words have been spoken many times. As Madiba once said, "It always seems impossible until it is done." And I, oh, I know the truth of those words from my own history and from the history of my country.

My ancestors came here in chains. My parents and grandparents knew the sting of segregation and discrimination. Yet I attended some of the best universities in this country. I had career opportunities beyond my wildest dreams. And today, I live in the White House, a building — but we must remember, we live in a home that was constructed by slaves.

Today, I watch my daughters — two beautiful African-American girls — walking our dogs in the shadow of the Oval Office. And today, I have the privilege of serving and representing the United States of America across the globe.

So my story and the story of my country is the story of the impossible getting done. And I know that can be your story and that can be Africa's story too. But it will take new energy, it will take new ideas, new leadership from young people like you. That is why we brought you here today.

We've done this because we believe in Africa, and we believe in all of you. And understand we are filled with so much hope and so many expectations for what you will achieve. You hold the future of your continent in your hands, and I cannot wait to see everything you will continue to accomplish in the years ahead.

Women and Girls: A Sound Investment

Some of you have asked, "Why should we focus on women and girls? Why shouldn't we focus on empowering everyone — women and girls, men and boys?" It's a good question. The answer is because a gap exists between the opportunities and resources available to men and boys and those available to women and girls.

For every year of secondary schooling a 


girl receives, her earning power increases by 15-25 percent

According to the [U.S. Agency for International Development](#) (USAID), 1 in 3 girls around the world will experience gender-based violence in their lifetimes, 1 in 5 girls in the developing world who enroll in primary school never finish, and 1 in 7 girls in the developing world are forced into marriage before their 15th birthdays.

A girl's situation does not improve with age. According to the [World Health Organization](#), complications during pregnancy and childbirth are the second leading cause of death for girls aged 15-19 globally. According to the [Food and Agriculture Organization](#) (FAO), women own just between 10 and 20 percent of the world's land, despite making up more than 40 percent of its agricultural labor force. And according to [USAID](#), women-owned enterprises make up as little as 10 percent of all businesses in Africa.

Whether in the classroom, the hospital or the office, women and girls face challenges unique to their gender. The good news is that even a small investment in a woman or a girl can have a huge return.

When Women Succeed, Society Succeeds


Women make up nearly 64 percent of  Rwanda's Chamber of Deputies and nearly 39 percent of Rwanda's Senate. Many credit women's political participation in Rwanda with helping the country recover from its civil war.

Investing in women and girls means taking actions — big and small — to bring about gender equality. It means changing society's attitudes and behaviors toward women and girls. It means rethinking the roles and responsibilities of women and girls. It means creating a world where women and girls enjoy the same human rights and have access to the same opportunities as men and boys.

Investing in women and girls isn't just the right thing to do, it's the smart thing to do. Here are some benefits investing in women and girls can have:

Stronger democracies. Women's participation in politics has tangible gains for democracy. According to USAID, countries where women hold at least 30 percent of political seats are more inclusive, egalitarian and democratic. Not only that, it also found that higher rates of women's political participation are associated with lower levels of government corruption.

Improved public service delivery. Including women in the political space has benefits for citizens, too, because women are more likely to invest in the public good than their male counterparts. In India, for example, USAID found that political districts with more female representatives enjoyed greater community benefits such as investments in drinking water facilities and roadways.

By including women in the peacekeeping  process, countries ensure more lasting

and just outcomes following conflict.

Enhanced food security. The FAO estimates that if women had the same access to productive resources as men, they could increase yields on their farms by 20-30 percent. That would be enough to feed an additional 150 million people.

More lasting peace. When women play a role in conflict situations, they become drivers of reconciliation and reconstruction. Evidence shows that including women in conflict-related decisionmaking and peace-building efforts can lead to more durable, comprehensive and widely accepted peace agreements.

Greater economic growth. According to USAID, when 10 percent more girls go to school, a country's GDP will grow on average by 3 percent. And a girl's individual earning power increases by 15-25 percent for every year of secondary schooling she receives.

These are just a few ways investing in women and girls enables a community, a country and a continent to flourish.

What's Next?

As Secretary Kerry said, "No country can succeed unless every citizen is empowered to contribute to its future. And no peace can endure if women are not afforded a central role."


So over the next month, commit to investing in women and girls. It can be something as simple as reading a book to your younger sister or as elaborate as hosting a series of financial literacy workshops for women in your community. The goal is to act and, through your actions, bring about a more equal, prosperous and secure world for everyone.

Think of the impact the YALI Network could make if all 130,000 of you act.

Building skills in technology

"By building skills in technology creation, people can develop innovative solutions to community and economic problems and empower themselves to explore their full potential."

- Regina Agyare

A Tech Needs Girls volunteer conducts a  lesson in writing computer code with girls in Accra. Credit: R. Agyare

Software developer Regina Agyare believes Information Technology (IT) can drive significant social change. A 2014 Mandela Washington Fellow, Agyare helped launch the U.N.-related project Tech Needs Girls in Ghana. Her own company, Soronko Solutions, uses information technology to develop solutions allowing clients to reach their potential.

YALI Network Question: How does IT promote human potential?

Agyare: Technology is a tool and an enabler to help people take an idea or solution from inception to execution. IT can help your idea leapfrog infrastructure gaps and impact a large number of people. By building skills in technology creation, people can develop innovative solutions to community and economic problems and empower themselves to explore their full potential.

Question: Describe Soronko's efforts to pursue those goals with girls in Ghana.

Agyare: Ghanaian women and girls are lagging behind in developing IT skills. At Soronko we run a project called Tech Needs Girls, which is a mentorship program where we teach girls between the ages of 6 and 18 years old how to code and create with IT tools. The girls are trained by young female mentors who study science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) in the university. They use a unique curriculum, which makes coding fun and allows for creativity and problem solving.

Some of the girls in these programs are from slum communities and could be forced into early marriage. By teaching them coding skills, we hope to help them empower themselves economically and continue their education.

Q: Have the newly trained girls been able to move into jobs?

Agyare: Tech Needs Girls alumnae are currently doing internships at the biggest software company in Ghana, called Rancard Solutions.

Q: What has Soronko Solutions accomplished in helping Ghanaian businesses better use technology to expand?

Agyare: At Soronko Solutions, we believe in using technology to help Ghanaian businesses grow and gain visibility. We have built services to help a wide range of clients automate processes to make business operations more efficient, increase turnover and bring their services to the customer's doorstep.

Q: How does someone begin to work with or for Soronko?

Agyare: It is very accessible to work with Soronko. We are always looking for young individuals who are passionate about using technology to drive small businesses or promote social change. We also offer internships and sponsor clubs in the university where we train young women in STEM fields and prepare them for the job market or starting their own business.

Q: Soronko is working like some corporate and nonprofit hubs in the larger IT community that launch further waves of innovation in the communities surrounding them. How does that work?

Agyare: Innovation hubs are very important because they provide the space, training, skills

development and inspiration to unlock the creative potential in our youth. They also allow for collaboration and for individuals with different skills and abilities to integrate their talents to solve community problems and develop themselves.

Q: What can YALI Network members do to start a hub in a community?

Agyare: The first thing would be to get a space to house hub activities. If one does not have access to a space, the next best thing is to create a virtual hub. That's an online community of people where knowledge is shared, innovation is encouraged and interactivity is expected. Hub members can meet regularly in open spaces or use community resources and spaces.

Q: Can their facilities also be meeting and networking spaces?

Agyare: Definitely, hub facilities can be meeting and networking spaces. It is actually important for the ecosystem and the success of hubs that meetings and networking among the members is encouraged.


Q: Are innovation hubs emerging in more places in Africa?

Agyare: Yes, and they are needed to address issues like Africa's huge unemployment problem and to engage young people to become innovative change-makers and problem solvers.

Lukonga Lindunda, a Mandela Washington Fellowship alumus, provided [this interactive map](#) of innovation hubs around Africa. Read more about [Lindunda](#) and [BongoHive](#), the innovation hub he co-founded in Zambia.

Girl Power and Protection, Now and Forever

Even as a child in Zimbabwe, Nyaradzo Mashayamombe tried to defend and protect abused orphans. In secondary school, she saw boys bullying and mistreating girls and began to dream of a world where things could be different.

Nyaradzo Mashayamombe visits schools  regularly to talk to schoolchildren about their role in preventing violence. (Photo Credit: N. Mashayamombe)

Describing herself as a born activist, Mashayamombe foresaw a time when boys would respect girls as much as themselves. Mashayamombe, a member of the YALI Network, also set her sights on bringing girls greater opportunities for education and achievement.


Mashayamombe celebrates the International Day of the Girl on October 11 with the knowledge that she has shared that dream with about 38,000 people across Zimbabwe through the organization she began in 2010, [Tag a Life International \(TaLI\)](#).

With financial support through U.S. Embassy Harare, the U.S. President's Plan for Emergency AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and Hivos, a Netherlands-based international development organization, Mashayamombe has started TaLI clubs in 76 schools. These chapters and their supporters work to reduce gender-based violence and to address the social circumstances that give rise to such violence. Reducing the occurrence of HIV infection among abused girls is another important objective.

The U.S. Embassy projects that its financial support for TaLI will allow the organization to reach 300 more schools with lessons of respect and opportunity over the next two years.

Even while TaLI supporters envision a time in Zimbabwe when children are never tormented and girls never abused, the organization works to provide resources to children who have already been victimized. TaLI provides medical attention, psychosocial counseling and other support services to abused children. The organization also works with law enforcement to help bring cases of abuse to justice.

"We want to see the government of Zimbabwe committing more resources to the issue of child protection," Mashayamombe said in a statement released in recognition of the Day of the Girl. "We also want to see well-resourced justice delivery system and a swift response to cases of abuse."

South African schoolgirls play a ball 
game. Ensuring
that girls get educational opportunities will
improve
their entire future.

Reducing gender-based violence and promoting greater empowerment of girls and women is a cause with broad support across the YALI Network. Another network member wrote us about her work at [Sonke Gender Justice](#). This South Africa-based NGO works across Africa to strengthen government, civil society and citizen capacity to promote gender equality, prevent domestic and sexual violence, and reduce the spread and impact of HIV and AIDS.

Itumeleng Komanyane writes that Sonke Gender Justice envisions a world in which men, women and children can enjoy equitable, healthy and happy relationships that contribute to the development of just and democratic societies.

Creating greater empowerment and opportunity for all is a key value of the Mandela Washington Fellowship program. If you are a community leader involved with these important issues — like Mashayamombe and Komanyane — think about applying to become a 2015 Mandela Washington Fellow. The application is open until November 5, 2014, so apply soon. Learn more [here](#).
